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Changing the cultural story in child protection: learning from the insider's experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that child protection organizations intent upon tackling low retention rates and enhancing the services they offer to children and families must pay greater attention to the emotional life of the organization and to enabling workers to manage the intrusiveness of the work. Findings from in-depth qualitative interviews with child protection workers and supervisors are reported in the form of a story about the insider's experience of the organization. The consequences of working in an organizational culture that denies opportunities for workers to understand and manage the emotional toll of the work are explored. While reporting on research and work undertaken with Australian child protection workers between 1997 and 2002, the view is expressed that these ideas have current relevance to many organizations in the health and welfare field whose core business involves workers coming into contact with individuals in complex, uncertain and ambiguous situations. The paper looks at what needs to change about organizational structures such as supervision to promote learning within a more healthy organizational culture. A clear message from senior managers and politicians to workers that the organization endorses the open expression of feelings, doubts and uncertainties is pivotal.

INTRODUCTION

Overloaded child protection systems across the world appear plagued by low morale and high attrition rates of front line workers (Her Majesty's Stationery Office 2005; Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research 2005; Scott 2006; Tham 2007). A recent Australian government discussion paper about a national framework for child protection proposes a National Workforce Strategy to address identified problems of availability and capacity within the child protection workforce across all jurisdictions (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008). Relationship-based practice is now understood as an important contributor to positive client outcomes (McKeown 2000; de Boer & Coady 2007), suggesting that an inexperienced and unstable workforce leaves children and their families vulnerable to ineffective and potentially damaging interventions.

In a number of states and jurisdictions in Australia, one of the favoured solutions has been overseas recruitment, but this 'blood transfusion' (Scott 2006) rarely leads to more than short-term gains in staffing numbers. The argument presented here, based on some of the findings from a larger study, which sought to examine why workers leave child protection, is that longer term and sustained change in retention rates is more likely to occur where there is sufficient focus on the organizational culture and the way in which it is experienced by front line workers.

Historically, organizational theory has tended to be used as a way of thinking about human resource difficulties in child protection in Australia (Hough 1994; Markiewicz 1996), but while recognizing the importance of this critique, this research took a different

path with a focus on the impact of the work on the individual and the capacity of a large statutory organization to support and enable workers in child protection to manage the emotional demands of the work, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would stay in the job.

The research was carried out in the statutory agency, which delivers the child protection programme across the state of Victoria, in Australia. This agency has had a long-term problem with high attrition rates (Auditor-General's Report 1996; Department of Human Services 2007) and was supportive of research which could contribute to a way forward. As with other statutory systems across the English-speaking developed world, Victoria has struggled for the last decade with increasing numbers of notifications and renotifications (The Allen Consulting Group 2003). The work is increasingly complex with child protection workers attempting to engage with families experiencing a chronic mix of problems arising from mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse and family violence. Data show high numbers of notifications involving emotional abuse, and over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (The Allen Consulting Group 2003). In 2005, the Victorian Government introduced new legislation, a policy framework and resources to strengthen the broader family services sector with a view to freeing up the statutory service to engage with children who are most at risk. While recognizing the potential impact of these changes on improved outcomes for children and families, they come at a time when 45% of the workforce still has less than a year of experience and there is a 30% attrition rate for entry-level workers (Department of Human Services 2007). The findings reported here relate specifically to the emotionally intrusive nature of child protection and how well the dominant culture and organizational structures assisted workers to understand and manage these powerful dynamics. While supervision is recognized as having considerable potential to contribute to a healthy learning culture, it is suggested that without leadership and political will there are some ongoing impediments to success.

THE LITERATURE

The management of individual anxiety and supervision

A long-standing but somewhat peripheral theme in the child protection literature has been the management of individual anxiety and the ways in which workers can adopt unhelpful defence mechanisms as a way of coping with what must be understood as a normal response to the anxiety-provoking nature of the work (Copans *et al*. 1979; Tonnesmann 1979; Hadjiisky 1987; Killen 1996). While many of these responses occur at an unconscious level and can be irrational, they are highly influential in relationships with clients and others (Stanley & Goddard 1993; Fitzgerald & McGregor 1995; Bunston 1997). To work effectively and to address the issue of keeping the child safe, workers must have an understanding of, and capacity to deal with, the personal and professional impact of the anxiety inherent in the work (Cooper 2005).

The supervisor is understood as having a key role to play in providing individual reflective supervision where workers can explore their reactions and feelings towards those with whom they work and to ensuring accountability (Clare 1988; Preston-Shoot & Agass 1990; Rushton & Nathan 1996). Meeting the dual functions of task and process in supervision, accountability and support, presents individual supervisors and the organizations in which they work with a critical challenge (Hughes & Pengelly 1997). The increasing trend towards bureaucratized practice has often resulted in supervision becoming skewed towards policy and procedural imperatives, rather than towards reflection and professional development (Clare 2001; Gibbs 2001c; Jones & Gallop 2003; Ruch 2007; Gibbs, La Trobe University, Albury-Wodonga, unpublished data). The importance of organizations finding ways to redress this balance between action-orientated and thinking-orientated supervision is confirmed by the growing body of evidence that there is a clear link between client outcomes and supervisory behaviour, such as their style in supervision (Poertner 2006; J. Wonnacott, University of Sussex, Brighton, unpublished results), and client outcomes and the organization's social context (Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998; Hemmelgarn *et al*. 2006; Yoo *et al*. 2007).

The management of organizational anxiety

According to theorists such as Menzies-Lyth (1970) and Halton (1994), groups of individuals working in emotionally charged arenas like child protection can collectively, often unconsciously and collusively develop defences to allay their anxiety stemming from the core task. These defensive strategies are often built around avoidance so that when they become institutionalized, they come to hinder the task performance and help the individual to avoid the experience of

uncomfortable feelings generated while dealing with abused children and their families, rather than developing ways to tolerate these emotions and deal with the anxiety. Opportunities for practice insights into what these emotions might tell the practitioner about the child's experience are lost and there are dangers that decision-making and judgements can become contaminated by unchallenged emotions and untested assumptions, biases and personal beliefs.

METHOD

It was hoped that an embedded case study (Yin 1989) would contribute to a greater understanding of recruitment difficulties and the development of strategies which would lower attrition rates. In-depth, open-ended interviews provided a way of accessing the stories and narratives through which the participants constructed the world of working in a child protection setting (Denzin 1989; Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Silverman 2005) and to examining the consequences of their subjective constructions. The author wanted to understand how child protection workers and supervisors made sense of their professional interactions and to give them time and space to reflect and talk about difficult and challenging experiences in a way that they might not have done before and that other research methodologies could not do.

In a single case study, it is important to consider how representative the findings might be to other populations. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 300) propose that the concept of trustworthiness is a good concept for assessing 'transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability'. It was important to overcome threats to trustworthiness and credibility through 'prolonged engagement' in the field and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 307), constant checking back with interviewees and looking for exceptions to emerging theories (Rubin 2000). Silverman (2005) suggests that the use of appropriate theoretical sampling techniques also allows the researcher to obtain generalizability to other populations.

Design

The first phase in the research explored the initial experiences of workers coming into a statutory child protection service and concentrated on the challenges they face. The data collected would give a comprehensive picture of the issues facing them as they entered this demanding field of practice. During 1998, 22 workers were selected, using purposive sampling, for individual in-depth focused interviews with the author. Within this phase, two groups of workers were identified by the author on the basis of their length of employment in the organization. The first were named the 'new recruits' by the author because they had only recently joined the organization and had an average length of stay of only 4 months. Organizational data showed that those recruited into the organization in this entry-level position rarely had prior experience of working in child and family welfare. Each new recruit was given a pseudonym beginning with M and extracts from their stories are reproduced in the findings section.

The other group, named the 'stayers' by the author, had been in the job for over 18 months and had an average stay of 3.3 years. These participants were given a pseudonym beginning with S. Initially it was hoped that the stayers would have been in the job for much longer, but the organizational data showed that this was not going to be possible because of low retention rates. It was considered that these two groups would provide different but 'expert' accounts of early experiences within child protection. This phase ended at a point of saturation where no new ideas were being generated (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005).

An inductive theoretical approach allowed for new understandings and ideas to develop during the course of the interviews (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). The findings of the first phase of the research drew particular attention to the importance of support and supervision in child protection, with many participants describing having to cope with little supervision which, when they did get it, was primarily about task and getting the job done. As one of the aims of the research was to find ways of retaining workers, it became important to consider the capacity of the supervisor to make a difference in the life of a front line worker. The literature was revisited and the second phase of the research planned. Here, the author sought to understand the world of the child protection supervisor and to put in that context the stories told by the new recruits and stayers.

In 2000, using theoretical sampling, 11 child protection supervisors were interviewed. As the explanatory theory was evolving through the process of the research, the author thought it important to go to participants who could contribute to the further development of the theory. This group was named the 'rising stars' by the author, as many of them were quite new into the role but had been promoted from within the organization from a front line position. The supervisors were all given a pseudonym beginning with K.

Data analysis

Data analysis and the generation of the theory from the data were informed by 'grounded theoretical analysis' (Kellehear 1993). The findings are reported using 'thick description' (Lincoln & Guba 1985) in the form of large extracts of verbatim data, which help to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. This enables the reader to gain a sense of trust about the interpretations that have been made (Rubin 2000).

All the interviews were taped and recorded, so that the author had over 50 hours of transcribed data plus field notes and observations. A key task was to code the data by meanings, feelings and actions, and to look for relationships between events and processes (Charmaz 1991). Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 23) refer to the 'continuous, iterative enterprise of data reduction, of display and of conclusion drawing or verification'. In both phases of the research, the large amount of data was analysed at many different levels and in a number of different ways, including the search for metaphors (Miles & Huberman 1984) and for 'cultural stories' (Miller & Glassner 1997, p. 106). 'Cultural stories' allow participants to weave their own story into a story about the larger group of which they are part. It is a way for them to give meaning to their experiences.

The high level of consistency of the data with developing interpretations was a further indication of the credibility of the research findings. After Phase One, the author presented ideas and the understandings of the data at a number of forums where participants and others contributed to the iterative process of the research (Gibbs 2001a,b,c; J.A. Gibbs, British Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, York, unpublished results; J.A. Gibbs, International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, Istanbul, unpublished results).

FINDINGS

The story of working in child protection: an insider's perspective

Being a new recruit in child protection is like 'sinking or swimming'

> There was not much supervision there for me when I first started. There was not much direction. It was very much thrown in the deep end and swim or you're going to sink and I mean after the fourth week I was ready to quit. (Meg)

To 'sink or swim' as a description of learning in child protection perhaps reflects an organizational culture lacking in compassion and sensitivity to the needs of individual new recruits. Nevertheless, this particular metaphor reflects the way a number of the new recruits in this study constructed their early learning experiences and was their resource for conveying a central feature of the organizational culture.

Feelings of being 'overwhelmed' and 'confused' feature in the individual stories of the new recruits. For some participants, there was too little formal supervision and they had set about looking for someone to give them guidance.

> I had to ask a lot of questions. I had been here two months before I knew . . . I went looking for my boss one day and it had supervision written up on the board and I thought – what's supervision . . . (Melissa)
>
> I was given so much information so quickly that I was confused and frustrated that I didn't know where I was meant to be going. The worst thing was I'd ask someone something they'd give me an answer. I'd go and ask someone something else and they'd give me a different answer. As a new worker, you just want information [. . .]. (Melanie)
>
> It was chaotic and not productive. I mean I was reading and I was doing things that I really didn't have the understanding of how it all came together or what I was reading didn't make a lot of sense in a practical way . . . (Margaret)

There are a number of limitations inherent in the model of learning, which emerged in this organizational setting. It might best be described as a transmission model where the 'novice' is dependent on the 'expert', and the focus is on learning to apply set procedures and processes to individual cases. Deep level learning requires a supervisor to encourage a worker to become immersed in the experiences they are having often through well-formulated reflective questions and account is taken of difference and uniqueness of client situations. By being told what to do and then returning for the next set of instructions, there appeared a danger of encouraging surface responses to complex situations rather than developing the process skills which they will need as a practitioner. Constant exposure to an action-orientated prescriptive culture means the new recruits will not learn the value of standing back and thinking reflectively about what happened and why. A 'sink or swim' approach to learning contrasts sharply with a developmental approach and the application of an instructional approach means less likelihood that these workers will develop the capacity to critically evaluate assessment data and formulate a clear conceptual framework for individual cases.

> . . . 'this is your client, this is what you've got to do. The court case is coming up, you've got to do the affidavit, the application, the court report. These are the days you have got to do it.'

> That's how I learnt. You go back and get another case and have to go through the same thing. (Mary)

From the beginning, the new recruits learnt the importance of knowing the procedures but there seemed few opportunities to process and reflect upon what the material might mean.

> . . . it's just about learning procedures, court procedures which I still haven't got my head around. I mean I made a dreadful mistake last week – I won't do that again. (Molly)

Learning by making a mistake was a recurrent theme, often accompanied by a hint that the supervisor's response was one of criticism. Given the demanding nature of the work, it is important that the supervisory relationship is experienced as safe and containing so that new recruits can talk about things they are finding difficult and challenging. There is a danger that workers will suppress and deny problems if they fear being blamed and criticized.

A paucity of opportunities for workers to stand back and think means that they are also more likely to develop poor patterns of practice where they immediately look for solutions and short circuit to a reactive response. Workers operating predominantly in action mode are rarely thinking at a conscious level about the values and assumptions which are shaping what they do and are particularly prone to picking up unconscious incompetencies in the form of poor habits, beliefs and styles. One of the key benefits of reflective practice is that it enables the practitioner to examine their implicit theories of action and to engage with the complex issue of 'power relations, structures and ways of thinking' (Fook 1999, p. 202). Margaret quoted below was a new recruit who appeared more able to critically reflect on the implications of learning by modelling her practice on that of a more experienced worker, but the dangers of this had also not escaped her, and had raised her anxiety.

> You are learning off other workers that you don't know where they have learnt it from, whether they have learnt it from somebody who doesn't know what they are doing or what – and even some workers that go through all the training still don't know a lot. I have noticed there are some workers that I don't think I want to learn from them. It is scary stuff. (Margaret)

A number of the new recruits appeared to be 'stuck in action' (Morrison 2005) as a result of the bureaucratic demands placed upon them. A common complaint was the amount of time spent completing the paperwork and learning how to comply with the procedures and processes. An ever-increasing proliferation of policies and procedures which have been introduced to assist in the management of risk appear to have come to drive practice and to significantly reduce the amount of time workers have to spend with children and their families.

> [. . .] it looks bad for our stats if we have got so many cases just sitting there that haven't been closed – but if you have been working with a family for three months you have got five million phone calls made to them and they want every one recorded. You are so busy you don't have time to be putting everything on it [. . .].
>
> I remember one supervisor saying, 'What's the problem with closing it? It will take half an hour to do each closure of each case.' It will take bloody days. (Margaret)

The response of the supervisor here perhaps suggests a lack of emotional attunement to Margaret's feelings and an indication of how easy it is to get caught up in action at each level of the process.

Time remained a scarce commodity for the stayers and it was difficult to see where in their busy action-filled days there were opportunities for engaging with clients and building relationships, both of which are critical in terms of assessing risk and in creating change.

> I can't believe the amount of training I've been to and heard about people carrying twenty-seven cases. You can't function that way . . . All you can possibly do is get it done. You don't have time to work with people; you're just doing a job. (Sandra)
>
> We have to have them [reports] in and out within a mandatory five days. We've got it down to three days which is what we've been instructed to do . . . and we're running into problems that we haven't had before that is not enough workers to actually pick them up . . . everybody else gets yelled at, from top management down. . . . we were told that it was coming down from on high that this is what the expectation was and this is what we have to do. (Sarah)

Focusing on surface 'doing' activities such as throughput, paperwork and compliance can become ways of avoiding the emotional challenges of working with dysfunctional and abusive families. Nathan (2002) calls this a 'manualizing defence' where it is much easier to resort to policies and procedures to dictate practice rather than thinking about the complex and ambiguous world of individual clients. Furthermore, in a model of adult learning, practitioners learn from experiences when they are assisted to interrogate what has happened at the level of thinking and feeling (Vince & Martin 1993 in Morrison 2005). They cannot learn only by 'doing'.

Looking at a deeper level at the stories told by the new recruits and the stayers, there appeared to be some concerning patterns in the way participants

made sense of their experiences. Menzies-Lyth (1970) discusses denial, splitting and projection, all of which are utilized as ways of coping with such feelings and avoiding the emotional challenge of confronting the feeling. In the research, one stayer expressed her concern that members of her team regularly denigrated clients. She described a 'them and us' mentality and was distressed that managers did not challenge this with workers:

> [. . .] the baby that just came across to us and it's the most horrific abuse, the most horrific situation. When we were talking about it yesterday all people could do was continuously laugh and make jokes and this is because people can't deal with this [. . .]. It gets more difficult though when people hang up the phone after a conversation with their clients and say 'that f . . . mongrel' and that stuff that becomes so much part of what you do each day. (Shelley)

Another stayer suggests that this 'them and us' mentality exists in relationships with both 'clients' and 'management'.

> I think the bottom line is that we're all human beings and we expect to be treated like that. We're not machines we've got feelings. We see horrible things every day, have a huge workload every day. We're abused made to feel degraded and I guess we don't expect management to treat us like that as well. and I think if you asked anyone in this building for their feelings about that they'd say we're human beings and we should be treated like that. (Sally)

A new recruit commented directly about the culture as she experienced it:

> You have to be prepared to make mistakes, you have to be prepared to accept criticism from everybody and you have to learn to laugh. You know in the end you aren't going to matter. (Molly)

If workers do not feel valued by the organization, it is challenging to see how they can continue to work effectively in child protection. Feeling unsupported and vulnerable to criticism can result in defensive, angry and blaming behaviour where it is easier to stick rigidly to processes and procedures or to go into flight mode and leave the organization.

The following quote depicts the level of distress and anger felt by one new recruit whose experience of working in the programme can best be described as 'surviving' the pain and then getting out. She clearly constructs 'management' as punitive and blameworthy.

> After surviving three months in child protection I would still say that lack of support, supervision and debriefing are major problems in staff retention [. . .].
> [. . .] I still feel very unsupported. Staff are pushed and pushed to perform beyond normal capabilities. Supervisors snap at you, order you around and offer no praise or thanks [. . .]. If anyone can't handle the relentless pace expected of us this is personalized, as if everyone else can handle it okay [. . .]. We are all expected to be martyrs for the cause and our personal lives, our families and our health suffers [. . .]. Nobody seems to care that they burnout workers regularly [. . .]. This is why I won't stay. (Mercedes)

What appeared to be missing in the accounts from the new recruits and the stayers were opportunities to unravel and explore the complexities and ambiguities of the work but also the experience of working in the organization.

> I dealt with it myself – I suppose I've always seen it and I still do to some degree that if you're not coping it's a sign of weakness. That's how I feel and I also didn't feel supported by my normal supervisor at the time and I wouldn't let her know or see that. (Sharon)

Sharon suggested that it was easier to accommodate how anxious she felt about her work than risk being made to feel that she was not coping by her supervisor. Her avoidance strategy may work in the short term but overtime such a defence must impact on the effectiveness of her intervention with children and families.

Becoming a supervisor is like a 'baptism of fire'

> I was really freaked out by it all quite honestly [. . .]. It was pretty difficult, a very challenging time really, because I felt very raw, very inexperienced in the role and it was a real baptism of fire for me to go into a situation like this at that time.
> [. . .] I just decided to give it a try for the experience but I didn't like it, I didn't enjoy it [. . .] it was horrible. I hated it. Absolutely hated it [. . .].
> I wanted to run away. (Konnie)

If the new recruits experienced the organizational culture as one where you could 'sink or swim', the group of participants who had survived and chosen to stay often appeared to have once again faced an enormous struggle as they were launched, often prematurely into the role of supervisor. A 'baptism of fire' followed a process whereby they had been recognized by management as the next in line for promotion. They felt flattered but at the same time terrified, because they knew they were not really ready for the responsibility. In many ways, the key learning from their stories is just how personally challenging it is to 'move to the other side of the fence' and to have to renegotiate changed relationships with peers and managers. In their new role, they had become the 'holder of secrets', suddenly being made aware of performance issues relating to supervisees and privy to organizational information which otherwise they

would not have known. Few described feeling supported and well supervised at a time when they most needed it. Worryingly, their model of supervising was almost exclusively drawn from their own experiences, which for many were few and problematic. This highlights a significant danger inherent in the 'sink or swim' approach to learning where the new generation of supervisors have not developed a framework of reflective practice from which to develop supervisory practice. These findings point to an organizational imperative to examine the way in which it recruits to first-line management positions and the strategies it puts in place to support and prepare rising stars during this critical period of transition.

Being in a supervisor's role in child protection is like being the 'meat in the sandwich'

> I think it's a very difficult position. I think there's a lot of responsibility. Like you've got responsibility to the workers but you've also got the management above you. You know they've got expectations around what else we should be doing [. . .] and if those timelines aren't being met then the manager gets, you know, a lot of flak from the person above her, that goes back to head office, so then you as a team leader are getting this from management but then you have to pressure the workers to go out on visits when they really don't have time [. . .] [you feel] oh, 'the meat in the sandwich' or something like that. (Kaila)

Many of the rising stars appeared to have been left to manage their competing roles and conflicting demands with inadequate supervision. They expressed the same feelings of being overwhelmed as the new recruits, but in this case, they are in a position of having demands placed on them from two directions. Managers were requiring them to get on and manage the resources in the team without a disaster happening while the team members looked to them for support, guidance and frequent supervision. As professionals themselves, they were also thinking about the practice issues and the importance of offering an effective service to abused children.

> I think that the biggest frustration for me is that the set times for supervision, which for me is the main part of the job, they can be lost because other things happen and that's because of the nature of the work we do and the crisis responses that we obviously have to respond to. That's the frustrating part – ensuring people have supervision and it doesn't happen. It never happened for me when I was going through it all. (Keira)

In a similar defensive response to that of the new recruits and stayers, the rising stars expressed a 'them and us' mentality. While this supervisor desperately wanted to be effective in his role, embedded in his description of his role appears to be a rather angry and brittle attitude to workers.

> My role is to scrutinise the cases and our workers are well paid, and they must accept my role in scrutinizing or being scrutinized. This is child protection, they're not working at a shoe shop, and their practice must be scrutinized and if they don't like it too bad. It doesn't mean you have to be Attila the Hun to them, it's the way you do it too, but that's just the way it is, just the same as my practice is scrutinized by my manager. (Kim)

While senior managers were not interviewed, this quote from a rising star would suggest a similar process is in place at this level of relations.

> So I said, 'I need to work part-time again.' and her response [unit manager] is that 'I can't help you', basically. So sometimes that's difficult in that you feel like, and I don't want to be one of those people who goes on stress leave for thousands of years but I could easily be [. . .]. I can see exactly why people go on stress leave. That's why they go on stress leave because they feel like they're screaming and nobody can hear them and that's how I feel. Like I'm screaming and no-one can hear me. (Kelsey)

Again, in a similar vein to the new recruits and the stayers, the rising stars appeared convinced that there was no room for error in this environment, and yet many indicated that they had made mistakes and had been punished for them.

> For example my manager will say, 'Why didn't you make that phone call?' and I'll have had something really important that I was doing that day and I didn't get a chance and it was all around 'Why didn't you do this?' Rather than understanding context. It happens all around, like when you get a complaint come in, it's like, 'Why isn't this on CASIS [Client and Service Information System]?' and 'Why wasn't this done?' The negative [. . .] just all around. (Kay)

The rising stars described a culture where they felt they were not listened to and felt undervalued despite the enormous efforts they were making to perform well. A challenge for the rising stars is to understand the contribution they make to the organizational culture as experienced by the new recruits and stayers. It seemed as if they too lacked opportunities to examine their feelings and responses as a way of gaining insight into these complex processes.

DISCUSSION

The dominant story that shaped the new recruits' view of the work and the organization may suggest one

contributory factor to the problem of staff retention, as their early experiences revealed a culture characterized by a 'sink or swim' approach to learning with too little emphasis on thinking about situations and developing process skills to make sense of them. It is at this early stage in their career where new recruits need to be assisted to identify and explain the knowledge and frameworks that they use in practice and to confront and process their anxiety about working in the 'swampy lowland' of practice (Schon 1983, p. 3). Experiencing timely reflective supervision as a way of learning to be a professional is important as it helps establish a mindset of thinking about the link between feelings and action. Unprocessed feelings of drowning and being overwhelmed by the situation can lead to a fight or flight response, perhaps explaining in part why so many new recruits leave the job as soon as they do.

The study suggested that overtime a stayer in child protection needs to adjust to a working life dominated and shaped by policies and procedures, and their capacity to comply, monitored by key performance indicators. In the emotionally intrusive arena of child protection, there is a danger that anxious workers can find a dependence on the manual and guidelines comforting and a way of escaping the challenge of uncertainty and ambiguity. It appeared that for those who survived, however, there was a good chance of promotion to the supervisory level, but what awaited them were extremely high competing and conflicting demands with too little assistance in the form of support and guidance.

For an organization serious about reducing turnover in child protection, one component of change must be the emergence of the work with the child as a central focus, and this will only happen if the organizational culture becomes one that legitimizes and normalizes feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and ambivalence. Achievement of this change appears difficult and challenging. The promotion of thinking is critical in a practice arena which has arrived at a point where it is often 'action and solutions' which are valued. A tendency towards short-circuiting and avoiding the challenges of wrestling with complexity, ambiguity and anxiety is a current challenge for statutory agencies across the western world. Warman and Jackson (2007) propose a model of work discussion groups where practitioners bring concerns, difficulties or challenging issues preoccupying them with clients at risk. These groups prioritize the importance of thinking about what is going on rather than simply reacting to the problem. Similarly, Ruch (2007) suggests a model of case discussion, where practitioners bring cases for peer group discussion, ideally with a facilitator. Ruch emphasizes the need for practitioners to develop the capacity to think in an emotionally informed way about the case and their practice and to overcome some of the internal obstacles which lead to a resistance to thinking. These two models have their roots in the Tavistock Clinic approach and draw on psychodynamic concepts which encourage practitioners to understand what is going on beneath the surface of practice at the level of process.

The models mentioned above have considerable potential to contribute to changing the dominant organizational culture as described in this study. The authors advocate for the model in part based on the limitations they perceive in the delivery of effective individual supervision in child protection. Ruch (2007, p. 372) writes 'The supervisory model that dominates current practice is one based on surveillance rather than support, with the emphasis on monitoring, management and narrowly conceived performance indicators.' Her view is that organizations can more usefully look at promoting reflective practice through team and group models.

In one statutory child protection agency in which the author has worked for a number of years, there has been a sustained effort to develop a professional supervision strategy which incorporates initial training and ongoing professional development and application across the whole child protection programme. A four-day training programme provides a foundation of knowledge, theory and early skill development in relation to providing reflective practice supervision. This is closely based on Morrison's (2005) reflective practice model of supervision. Each participant then joins a monthly practice group which seeks to assist them to continue to learn how to be an effective supervisor but in addition the group provides reflective space for supervisors to bring problems and challenges from their practice as supervisors. These groups are facilitated by an external facilitator whose role is to encourage the participants to grapple with problems and to find ways of formulating and asking good questions which promote thinking within the group. The participants are encouraged to practise using the reflective practice learning cycle to interrogate the challenges they bring, at the same time as developing their capacity to use the approach in individual supervision. A shared language and framework about the importance of thinking and being reflective rather than reactive is important, as is encouraging supervisors to consider the part they contribute to challenging situations. If these supervisors can be assisted to understand the

psychological processes that are taking place, often at an unconscious level, there is greater potential for them to be able to contribute to containing structures and processes within supervisory relationships and, over time, to contributing to changing the current organizational culture.

Case and work discussion groups, reflective practice supervision and practice groups have great potential for providing opportunities for workers to develop their capacity to think and to grapple with the uncertainties and ambiguities of practice. Furthermore, participation in forums that provide reflective space is likely to lead to workers becoming more emotionally responsive to children and families. However, a cautionary note is that unless workers, and indeed supervisors, experience their wider working environment as a safe and secure enough place to take risks, and their organizational culture values and endorses reflective practice at every level, the impact of these initiatives will be diluted. If the lived experience of workers continues to be that they feel vulnerable to being individually blamed and targeted for punishment if things go wrong, they are more likely to resort to crisis-driven behaviour, watching their back and technical compliance (Hawkins & Shohet 2000, p. 170), all of which were evident in the study. While not minimizing the importance of the initiatives discussed above, creating cultural change involves a focus beyond individual and team activities.

In this study, participants spontaneously described the organizational culture in which they found themselves working, meaning the behavioural norms, values and expectations which characterize their working lives (Hemmelgarn *et al.* 2006). As such, the reader learns a great deal from an insider's perspective about the social context which influences them and to which they contribute, albeit, often at an unconscious level. The key metaphors reported here symbolize the consequences for workers and supervisors exposed to an unhealthy culture low in emotional capital and high on task completion and compliance. In the absence of containment, projected and displaced feelings can reappear in the relationships described between workers and clients, workers and supervisors, and supervisors and managers. An organizational culture that recognizes and values the need to support and enable workers to do their job will only dominate if this is promoted from the most senior level down through every level of the organization. In the Australian state system, this must mean that senior public servants and politicians have a highly influential role in setting the cultural climate for practice. While mention of uncertainty, complexity and unpredictability is a difficult political message, change will not occur unless politicians are prepared to speak openly and frankly about the nature of the professional challenge, rather than about the failure of individuals to comply with procedures.

CONCLUSION

If organizations are serious about lowering high attrition rates and recruiting more experienced workers into the work, they will need to actively seek to create a healthy and open organizational culture which prioritizes learning and allowing workers to think about the experiences they are having. The process of individual supervision has a part to play in providing workers at every level with opportunities to sit back and reflect on their work and the impact it is having on them. Practice groups and case discussion groups provide reflective space for workers and supervisors to think about the work, the organizations in which it takes place and the impact of anxiety on them individually and collectively. Unfortunately, workers will not experience as meaningful and genuine any strategy, such as a new supervision policy or training strategy, unless it is delivered within the context of a collaborative organizational environment, one of the features of which is that feelings are acknowledged and used to explore problems (Morrison 2005, p. 71).

While it is important for each individual to acknowledge and reflect critically upon their involvement in the largely unconscious processes described here, the impetus for change needs to be led from the top. It is incumbent not only upon senior managers but also politicians to consider the ways in which their voice and views are heard and experienced by workers, and how they too might contribute to a shared psychological defence system and culture. This may well be one of the biggest challenges facing those at the top of human service organizations.

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